

The Nature Of Humanity Part 1

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[0:00] Well, I'd like us to turn together back to Psalm 8, and let me read verses 3 and 4. When we started this two weeks ago, we noticed that people today will often talk about the real you, and that ties in with many of the dominant dynamics in our culture just now.

Things like identity and self and individuality. And for people today, to discover the real you is a good thing. There's a big value placed in our society on the whole idea of being who you really are. Being true to yourself. To be the real you is a positive step. And we noted that there are issues with that kind of thinking, and we can see the problems that it's created in our society.

But what we're trying to highlight is that that actually is a very important and very good thing to do. We absolutely need to think about who we really are.

But the problem today is that everyone around us is looking for the answer in the wrong place. Because the big claim of our series is that the only place where we will find out who we really are is in the Bible and in the Gospel.

[1:38] And part of that, part of what we're emphasizing, is that in contrast to the individualism that we see in the world around us, the emphasis in the Bible is on the collective identity that we share.

In other words, the Bible teaches us about the real us. And our series, well, our series was meant to be in six parts.

Two weeks ago, we looked at the creation of humanity. Tonight, we're looking at the nature of humanity. Then it'll be the purpose of humanity. Then the second part, we'll look in more detail at humanity as the image of God. Humanity as male and female.

Humanity as a blessed covenant creature. I say that it's meant to be six parts because tonight, this part, part two, is getting split into two.

So I had too much to say. I always have too much to say, but I had far too much to say tonight. So we're doing this bit in two parts. Before we come to that, though, let me just recap a wee bit of what we said a couple of weeks ago.

[2:39] When we thought about the creation of humanity, we saw the divine act of creation. The fact that humanity is created by the deliberate action of God. So you ask the question, where do you come from?

The answer is you come from the mind of God, from the will of God, from the activity of God. You're His handiwork. We also saw the distinct language of creation.

And if you look at the creation of humanity, the Bible uses a rich and varied vocabulary to describe how God has made you. And the third thing we highlighted was that humanity is the deliberate climax of creation.

So one thing that's very, very clear from Genesis 1 and 2 is that humanity, you, are made as the climax of creation. And so humanity enjoys a higher privilege than the rest of creation.

Humanity carries greater responsibility than the rest of creation. And humanity prompts intensified delight in the triune God who made us.

[3:38] It's at the creation of humans that the good creation becomes very good in the narrative of Genesis 1 and 2. Tonight we're moving on to look at the nature of humanity.

We're going to have to do it in two bits. And as we do that, we are trying to answer David's question in Psalm 8. What is man?

That's a question that humanity has always wrestled with. What are we? It's a question that we all need to think about. When you stand and look in the mirror, what are you looking at?

What is a human? What is the real you? What exactly are we? As we start thinking about that, I want you to just, in your heads, complete this sentence.

I am a... How would you finish that sentence? You don't need to answer it out loud.

[4:43] But I want you to think about it because that's the question that David's wrestling with. He looks at the stars, looks at the works of God's hands, and he's thinking, what is man that you're mindful of him?

The son of man that you care for him. David's confronted with his own finitude and insignificance. At the same time, he marvels at the wonder of God's voluntary condescension to come and meet us, to move towards us.

He sees the extraordinary privileges and responsibilities that God has endowed upon us. And he's left wondering, what are we?

That you're mindful of us. That you care for us. All of it's getting us to think about the nature of humanity. Now, as we start, it's important that we just think a little bit about what we mean by that term, nature, because it's a word that can be confusing.

When we speak about nature, very often we will speak about things that are sinful. When we speak theology, we'll talk about kind of our natural disposition, our nature in terms of our sinful nature.

[6:03] And so when we see behavior that's wrong, we lament the habits of natural man. And that's an appropriate thing to do, because there are times when the Bible does that. So sometimes the Bible will talk about our nature in a negative context.

So here's a couple of examples. 1 Corinthians 2, 14. The natural person does not accept the things of God for their folly to him. And then Ephesians 2, speaking about being dead and trespasses and sins, etc., etc.

You were by nature children of wrath. So the Bible does use the term nature in that negative term at times. And so it's appropriate to do that. But in terms of what we're thinking about tonight, when we're thinking about creation, when we're thinking about the nature of humanity, it's so important to remember that our original nature, our original condition was not sinful.

It was good. And therefore, strictly speaking, our true, real human nature is referring to our pre-fall condition.

In other words, what that means is that all the inclinations, all the influence and all the impact of sin are actually unnatural. And again, the Bible speaks in this way at times.

[7:21] Romans 1, for example, will speak about certain sins as being contrary to nature. And so what that means is that when we're talking about the created realm, you could actually maybe say that there's three levels.

There's the natural. And what we mean by that is the kind of physical world that's been created. Then there's the supernatural, which is also created by God.

But it's the spiritual realm, the realm of angels and heaven. But then there's maybe what we could call, and I made up this term, but I hope it works okay, what we could call the contranatural.

And by that, we basically mean sin. And the key point there is that sin is contrary to the nature that God has made us with.

And that contranatural aspect affects both the supernatural realm, there are fallen angels, and there is the reality of hell, and it affects the natural realm.

[8:25] And we see the impact of that in our own lives and in the lives of others. But the big point I want us to start with is to remember that the biblical view of humanity never makes human nature essentially sinful.

And that's so, so important to remember. The message of the gospel is not replacing nature with some kind of higher spiritual mystical experience.

So many religions and worldviews have taken that approach, where salvation means kind of getting away from the body, getting away from the physical, and getting into some kind of higher spiritual plane where we leave everything physical behind.

That is not the gospel. It's not what the Bible teaches. The gospel is not about grace replacing nature. The gospel is about grace restoring nature and taking us back to what God created us to be.

So when we're talking about the nature of humanity, we're talking about the original, good, God-honoring nature that God made us to have. Now, as we think about this a bit more, I've got kind of three vague headings that are sort of going to guide us a little bit.

[9:39] I want us to think about how we are created people, and then I want us to think about how a key part of the nature of humanity is that we are unique and united. But we're going to have to do a wee kind of dividing line there, because we're never going to get past the first point tonight.

So created people this week, and then we'll do unique and united next week. So as we think about our nature, there's a lot that we're going to be coming back to throughout this series.

And I want to highlight one big thing that I'm going to just put to one side, that when we talk about the nature of humanity, one key biblical answer to that question is to say that our nature is that we are the image of God.

And so the nature of humanity, a key aspect of the biblical teaching of that, is that we bear the image of God. But I want to put that to one side, because we're going to come back to that in more detail later in our series.

But that I am a question, that sentence, one very, very biblical and appropriate way to answer that question is to say, I am the image of God. I am an image bearer.

[10:54] That's one way to answer that question. But just put that to one side in your mind. We'll come back to that, because, well, I just put it later in the series, and we'll come to it then.

What I want us to focus on tonight is just the connection between our nature and the doctrine of creation, the fact that God is the creator of all that exists, including humanity. And what that means is that humanity, every human, is what we can call a created person.

And you might think, well, that's a very obvious thing to say. And it is obvious. You know, you're asking, what are you? I am a created person, is another way that you could answer that question.

But what I want us to see is that these two words are actually very, very important. To be created means that we are immediately placed in a position of dependence.

So anything that is created is totally dependent on the one who created us. And so we owe everything.

[11:58] We owe everything about our existence to God. And we've done nothing of ourselves. Humanity did not create humanity. Humanity. All of that, everything that we are, everything that we have in our existence is owed to the will of God, the activity of God, and the providential sustaining of God.

As Paul says in Acts 17, it's in him that we live and move and have our being. So we're created in a position of dependence. That's what it means to be created. But alongside that, humans are a creature, but you're also a person.

And theologians have argued, have highlighted that to be a person means to have some kind of independence and autonomy.

Not an absolute independence whereby we can exist on our own and do everything as though nothing else exists. Not at all. But in a derived sense, in a relative sense, to be a person means to have certain independence.

And that means that as a person, you can express opinions. You can make decisions. You can exercise freedom. In other words, a created person is not a fabricated robot just made to do something that's programmed to do.

[13:21] Instead, we're endowed with a level of freedom and ability and capability. And that's how God has created us. So we're created to be a creature and a person, a created person.

And that's very, very central to a biblical anthropology. And it's also, it also just makes so much sense of our experience. Because we're all like David on a starry night.

If it wasn't so wet and rainy tonight, you could stand outside, you could see billions of stars, and you're immediately like David. You look to the heavens, to the work of God's hand, to the moon and the stars, and you feel so aware of your smallness and your insignificance.

And you find yourself, you're looking up there, you're thinking, what is man? I'm absolutely tiny. I'm nothing. And yet, at the very same time, you are the only part of creation that has the awareness and the ability to ask that kind of question.

None of the billions of stars that you're looking at are asking that question. Only you can do that. And so, in those verses 3 and 4, you see the tininess of humanity, and yet, at the same time, you see the exaltation of humanity that we can actually ask that question.

[14:49] We can think, and we can speak, and we can wonder. And all of this is highlighted in the fact that, as created persons, we are endowed with many, many fascinating features and abilities.

Now, we're going to look at this in more detail when we come to thinking about being in the image of God. What I want to do is just give you a list that's compiled by a theologian called Verne Poitras. He wrote a book called Making Sense of Man. Verne Poitras, he's still alive. He's been a lecturer in the USA. It's like one of the coolest names ever, Verne Poitras.

That's such a great name. And he lists 16 features of humanity. Creatureliness, so we are creatures made by our creator. Interdependence, relying on one another, relying on God.

Earthiness, we're made from the dust, connected to the world around us. Sexuality, in terms of being made, male and female. Dominion, in terms of the responsibility that God's given us.

Personal fellowship, with one another and with God.

[15:52] Ability to love, a spirituality, so we're not just physical, there's a spiritual aspect to our identity. Religiosity, there's an awareness of a superior being. We know God, we know other things, we're able to exercise reason, we carry moral responsibility, we have a conscience, we have ability in language and communication, we have a purpose and a destiny.

Now you could probably add more things to that list and so you can look at that and think, well would I add more? I would probably add consciousness, the fact that we can be aware of ourselves and of things. Inventiveness, just as God has created so we too can be creative.

And not all of them are unique to humans but many of them are. And it's all prompting two good questions. What could you have done today, what have you done today that you could do without God?

And the answer is nothing. As creatures we're totally dependent on God. And even if we exercise things that feel like freedom and in some ways are freedom, the only reason we have that is because that freedom has been endowed to us by God.

What could you have done today, what have you done today that you could do without God?

Nothing. But the second question is, what have you done today that no other part of creation can do? The answer is loads.

[17:14] There is so much that you have done today that no other part of creation can do. And that's part of the wonder of who we are. And again, as we said, part of that ties in with the fact that we bear the image of God.

And we'll be thinking about that a little bit more in our series. But you're a created person, created with amazing features, amazing abilities, and it's all to the glory of God.

But this whole idea of being a created person means that there's actually now several tensions in our experience. And I want to just go through these together.

together. And I'm going to highlight five. We are flourishing and finite. We're privileged and responsible. We're knowledgeable and learning. We're autonomous and dependent.

We're wonderful and vulnerable. Okay. So let's go through these together. First of all, flourishing and finite. That's captured in the psalm that we sang, Psalm 103.

[18:20] As for man, his days are like grass. He flourishes like a flower to the field. But then the wind passes over it and it's gone. And its place knows it no more.

And so in each human, in every single one of you, there's an astonishing ability to thrive. It's amazing what you can do. Your abilities, your creativity, your potential, and what you've achieved in your life.

You might not think it's very much, but it's astonishing. It is astonishing what you've achieved in your life. You add together the achievements of the however many billion stars there are. It's not as much as what you've done. It's astonishing achievements, astonishing capacity to thrive in humanity. But at the same time, the way we are created means that that flourishing is always in the context of finitude, the fact that we are finite.

finite. Now, sin has drastically exacerbated that, and, you know, our fragility and our finiteness as our sins just ramped that up a lot.

[19:28] But what I want us to see and to highlight is that even before the fall, even when we were created originally, was never infinite. Humanity was never infinite.

infinite. And it's so important to think about this because one of our biggest mistakes is to forget our finitude, to forget the fact that we're finite.

And what we need to remember is that being finite does not necessarily mean being sinful. And it's so easy to think that, it's so easy to think that finitude is a synonym for death, that to be finite is part of us being broken.

That's not true. You're never made to be infinite. In fact, finitude is part of the good, wise, appropriate limits that God has placed on us and that He's created us to live within.

There's a quote from another theologian called Kelly Capic and he writes, we are not under any requirement to be infinite. Infinity is reserved for God alone.

[20:35] And this is immensely important and immensely relevant to all of your lives because I am pretty certain that every single one of you at certain points in your life and maybe even right now have set expectations of yourself that are impossible.

We always do it. We set expectations for ourselves as if we're infinite, as if we can do everything, as if we can fit everything into our lives, as if we can be good at everything, as if we can cope with everything and we spend our lives putting a whole host of unrealistic and unachievable expectations on ourselves and the world around us today that we live in is feeding that, making us do that, to think that we have to do that, we have to look amazing, we have to succeed, we have to earn loads of money, we have to be good at this, that and the next thing, whatever we do we have to be good, we have to be brilliant, we have to succeed, we have to be infinite, you never have to be infinite.

Being finite is part of how God has made us and yet today there's huge pressure and I think, and I hope it's okay to say this, I think it's especially true for women today, I think there is massive pressure on women today to be able to be everything and it's impossible and it's interesting that way back in Genesis 3 that was the temptation that the devil tried to use to seduce Eve to try and get her to think you need to be more than what you're made to be, God's holding you back, he's holding you back, take that fruit and then you'll be like him, then you'll be more than you are, you'll be better than you are, there's a higher level that you need to reach, go for it, and that's what led to the fall, and that's what had led to the devastating introduction of sin into humanity's experience, we must remember,

God never expects you to be infinite, he never expects you to be more than what he made you to be, humanity's flourishing and finite, humanity's also privileged and responsible, that's a crucial aspect of our nature as humans, God has endowed us with privilege and responsibility and we stand in a unique position in that regard, we are in a position of extraordinary privilege towards the rest of creation, we've got a whole range of abilities, opportunities, and experiences that are higher than anything else in creation, so we can love and laugh and we can speak and sing and we can design and construct and we can imagine and invent, we can dream and delight all to a level that nothing else in creation can do, and yet at the same time we are always accountable to God in a way that no other part of creation is, we are always responsible before him, always dependent upon him, and

Psalms 8 captures this beautifully because it says that we are lower and we're crowned, so we're lower than the heavenly beings and yet we've been crowned with glory and honor, and there's that tension there that we're not gods, we're not in the same category as the angels, we're not heavenly beings, animals, but we're also not, we're not just animals, we're not just matter, we've been crowned with glory and honor, and that balance of privilege and responsibility runs right through the Bible, and it's where humanity flourishes, when we enjoy the privileges that God has given us, and

when we carry the responsibilities that we were made to bear, and there's maybe a good question to ask yourself, you know, can you think of a time in your life when you enjoyed an amazing privilege?

[24:58] Something nice happened, maybe someone took you on a holiday, or maybe you were recognized for something that you've done, or maybe a time in your life when you were well paid for the work that you're doing, or whatever it might be, you think, that was a great privilege, that was wonderful, and it feels great, but also think of a time when you successfully carried responsibility, think of a time when you helped somebody, you supported a friend, you took a burden for somebody, you cared for somebody, you fulfilled an obligation, and you carried that responsibility, how did that feel?

It also felt brilliant, because we're made to carry privilege and responsibility, the two go hand in hand, but also knowledgeable and learning.

Ecclesiastes is the book that captures this very well, let me read verse 11 of chapter 3, he's made everything beautiful in its time, also he's put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

That phrase, eternity in man's heart, is pointing us to a key theological truth that we claim, the Latin phrase that we sometimes use is *sensus divinitatis*, I don't know Latin, but it makes me sound very intelligent, so I love putting it up there, that means a sense of the divine, the idea that in our hearts there's a sense of God, and that's a big claim that we would make that actually deep down everybody has that sense, everybody has that awareness of God.

But that knowledge of eternity, that knowledge of the infinite, is never an infinite knowledge. So we're aware of God and yet we cannot grasp him. We can only glimpse him.

[26:47] We can never put God into a box where we can say, we've got him sussed, we know it all. And what that means is that we're constantly learning, and this is again where you see something fascinating in humanity.

You see that humanity has a level of knowledge that totally exceeds the rest of creation. So compare yourself to anything else, go and chat to a stone outside and ask how much they know, doesn't know very much.

So you have a level of knowledge that far exceeds the rest of creation, and yet humanity knows better than any other creature just how much we don't know.

And just how much more there is for us to learn. There's this balance, this tension of being knowledgeable and learning. There's the balance of being autonomous and dependent. That comes back to what we were saying.

A person has an element of autonomy. We can make decisions, we can exercise freedom. But a creature is dependent, and those two things constantly remain in tension.

[27:47] The last one is that we are wonderful and vulnerable. It's absolutely amazing what humanity can do. Even Psalm 8 speaks about the mouths of babes and infants, speaking of the wonder and glory of God's creation.

What you can do as a human on a daily basis is astonishing. And as the collective human race, what we've accomplished is absolutely amazing.

I was introduced to a computer game this afternoon. What's it called? Q-W-O-P. So Q-W-O-P, you use the keys Q-W-O-P, and each of them, you've got a runner on the screen and you have to press the buttons Q-W-O-P in order to make the person run.

And so one button moves his thigh and one moves his calf on one leg and the other on the other leg. Q-W-O-P. It's absolutely impossible. So you press these buttons and the guy's legs go flying, and it's really, really hard to make the guy run.

You can run without thinking. To make a robot that can run, it can be done, but it's a massive amount of work. You can do it like that.

[29:07] It's amazing what you can do. It's amazing what humanity can do. Individually, collectively, our abilities are wonderful.

Humanity was created with astonishing capacities, yet within our creatureliness, and our personhood lies of vulnerability. And that's captured very powerfully in the Westminster Larger Catechism.

So some of you may have learned the catechism when you were wee. The catechism you'd have probably learned would have been the Shorter Catechism. There's also the Larger Catechism, both written in the 1640s.

It's just questions and answers explaining key truths about theology. And so the Larger Catechism just gives longer answers and it's got more questions. And so this is the Larger Catechism, question 17.

How did God create man? After God had made all the other creatures, he created man, male and female. Formed the body of the man from the dust of the ground and the woman of the rib of man. Endued them with living, reasonable, and immortal souls.

[30:09] Made them after his own image and knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, having the law of God written on their hearts, and power to fulfill it, and dominion over the creatures, yet subject to fall.

And so we're wonderful but vulnerable. And of course, we did fall. And that's part of the freedom that we misused.

And so as created persons, we exist within all these tensions. And these tensions could and should have been healthy, made in all these ways, to be flourishing and finite, privileged and responsible, knowledgeable and learning, autonomous and dependent, wonderful and vulnerable.

All of those could have existed in a healthy way as we lived out our lives in fellowship with God, relying on Him, living under His rule. But due to sin, all of these have become unhealthy.

All of these have become distorted. And instead of being balanced, they're all over the place. And the consequences are devastating.

[31:25] Sin has upset, has massively upset, the balance that God created us to have. But it's important for us to go back to what God made us to be.

He made you to flourish. He never made you to be infinite. He wants you to enjoy privileges. He wants you to carry responsibility. He's given you knowledge, but He wants you to learn.

He's endowed you with freedom, but never for a moment are you to live as though you're not dependent on Him. He's got wonderful, wonderful things that He can do through you.

But you must always remember that you're vulnerable, that we constantly need His protection. We are created people. But the last thing I want us to note is that that's true of us as individuals, but it's also true of us collectively.

And it's so important that we remember this because today, frequently, the individual comes before the collective. So in terms of the way people think, the way people behave, the choices people make, the individual comes before the collective.

[32:35] In other words, I matter before everyone else matters. And our society is driven towards that way of thinking. And throughout the whole of the 20th century, there was a turn towards the self, whereby the individual becomes the priority.

Looking after number one, I suppose, is the phrase that people use. And me matters more than us in much of today's thinking. In Scripture, it's the other way around.

The collective comes before the individual. And in Genesis 1 and 2, the word Adam is used to describe the collective human race before it's used as the first name of the first person.

And so the collective comes before the individual. And that's so important to remember in terms of the nature of humanity. Intrinsic to our nature is a collective interdependence.

So we'll see more of this as we go on, especially as we think about humanity as male and female. But collectively, we are interdependent. We depend on one another. No one can go it alone.

[33:46] No one can go it indefinitely alone. We all depend on one another. Central to our value is a collective beauty and worth.

So often, so often beauty is so individualized today, and yet, from the Bible's point of view, it's the collective beauty that matters more. A collective worth that we share together.

Fundamental to this world around us that was created to be our homeland is that it's made to be ours collectively, to be shared and enjoyed together, not simply to be mine individually.

And crucial to our purpose is that together we would belong to God. When God created persons, he created us to be a people.

In fact, he created us to be his people. In other words, from the very beginning, he created us to be a church.

[34:54] He created us to be his bride. That's what he made us to be. And do you know what that means when we talk about the nature of humanity?

It means that intrinsic to your nature is preciousness.

Intrinsic to your nature is the fact that you're precious. Now, that's not an earned preciousness. That is a preciousness that is graciously endowed by your creator. It comes from him.

It doesn't come from us. It's not a reason for pride. It's not a reason to be puffed up or to put our nose in the air. It's come from God. It's endowed by him, but it's absolutely real. The real you, the real us, is unspeakably precious.

In fact, you have no idea just how precious the real you actually is. And the reason that we know that is because the Bible doesn't just reveal God as your creator.

[36:16] It reveals God as your savior. And God created you to be precious. And when sin came into the world, he never gave up on you because you are precious.

And he sent his son all the way to the cross, to death and agony, to resurrection and glory so that you could be his again.

The real you is unspeakably precious. The real you, the real us, is made to be God's bride.

God's bride. And so when you think of the word nature, I don't want you to think of your weakness and your feelings and your mistakes and everything else.

I actually want you to think of the amazing handiwork of God forming you, planning you, wanting you, making you the real you to be his own.

[37:26] Amen. Amen.